



# THE SPINOFF

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POLITICS



JACINDA ARDERN ANNOUNCES CULTURE FUNDING AT TE PAPA. (PHOTO BY HAGEN HOPKINS/GETTY IMAGES)

## Now is the time to invest in the creative arts

Paul Millar | Guest writer  
Opinion

The prime minister yesterday **announced** a package including \$25m to 'provide artists whose projects are funded by Creative NZ with jobs.' An even more substantial investment in the creative arts will help drive our post-Covid recovery, argues Paul Millar.

When Covid-19 forced the postponement of the popular international literary festival WORD Christchurch, director Rachael King turned disappointment into **an opportunity** "to do something different" by focusing on New Zealand books and writers and giving them

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It was an astute move given the [reported boom](#) in post-lockdown sales of New Zealand books. But then King – herself a talented novelist – does have experience in pivoting promptly in response to a crisis. Following Canterbury’s earthquakes she expanded WORD’s biennial festival into an ongoing events series that grows more dynamic year by year.

Many others also responded creatively to the earthquakes’ challenges. [Gapfiller](#), [Life in Vacant Spaces](#) and the [Festival of Transitional Architecture](#) captured imaginations and instilled hope. The [Christchurch Art Gallery](#), the [Christchurch Symphony Orchestra](#) and the [Court Theatre](#) proved equally flexible and inventive. As the then-director of the Christchurch Art Gallery [Jenny Harper](#) put it, “Art has shown itself to be nimble and agile and able to cement a feeling of regeneration.” Christchurch earned its place on *Lonely Planet*’s 2013 list of the world’s top 10 cities for its mix of “[Kiwi inventiveness, creativity and resilience](#)”.

That mix is also embedded in the city’s new [Toi Ō Tautahi – Arts and Creativity Strategy](#), which sees the creative arts as being “about bringing wider benefits to the city—improving people’s wellbeing, sense of identity and connectivity, activating and bringing life to the city, attracting visitors and boosting the economy”. This strategy recognises “the role the arts and creative sector have and can play in healing, connecting communities and finding innovative solutions to a range of issues”.

There are excellent reasons to make this strategy, or something like it, Aotearoa New Zealand’s manifesto for creativity in the post-Covid world. The Ministry for Culture and Heritage [reports](#) that, “Economically, our cultural institutions, organisations, artists and creative minds make a significant contribution to our economy, with GDP of more than \$11 billion before the Covid-19 pandemic.”

Susan Bidwell’s review of the international literature on “[the arts in health](#)” finds ample evidence “from both quantitative and qualitative studies that participating in creative arts can result in significant benefits to psychosocial health, including improved self-esteem, confidence, self-efficacy, improved social connections, and overall quality of life”. The historian and biographer Michael King [wrote](#) that “literature is one of the few things that makes sense of life, when life itself does not.... It is our writers more than anyone else who have been asking and answering questions about who we are and where we belong.”

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instruments to burn out a YouTube server farm. Some of these children go on to become students at the University of Canterbury's [Ilam School of Fine Arts](#) and [School of Music](#). Watching them grow as artists is tremendously rewarding, and a testament to the commitment of the academics training them. There are talented young artists like these right across the country.

Many will have something extra, not just talent, but originality, willpower, dedication, a tremendous capacity for hard work, and the courage to take risks. If they become successful artists they will have learned to be entrepreneurial, resilient, passionate, full of self-belief, and able to cope with disruption. They will persevere in the knowledge that success isn't guaranteed, and that their next show might be their last. Their work will promote wellbeing, create a sense of community, contribute substantially to the economy, and, as a form of cultural capital, will have the capacity to enhance our reputation on the world stage.



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THE MILLENNIUM SCULPTURE IN CATHEDRAL SQUARE, CHRISTCHURCH (PHOTO: EYE UBIQUITOUS/UNIVERSAL IMAGES GROUP VIA GETTY IMAGES)

Artists want to make art, so let's imagine ways to move beyond the existing structures and support them to produce work that also aids our recovery and enhances our wellbeing. What if we funded the NZSO, or one of our other orchestras, to base itself in Queenstown for a month in the ski season, and marketed vacation packages that included excellent skiing, fine dining, spectacular scenery, and evening concerts by world-class performers? What if kapa haka groups, theatre companies, comedians, musicians, and dancers were funded to travel to every town and city in New Zealand, and take the best of our creative arts to the regions? What if, as our borders slowly open, we market high-end art tours through the nation, stopping at galleries and craft workshops big and small, with artist talks along the way?

What if artists were funded to give master classes, public talks, studio and gallery tours? What if film makers and creative writers were supported to find ways to tell our Covid stories, document our challenges and triumphs, help make sense of life in the era of the

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of ventures like the [Dog Park Art Project Space](#). With Covid predicted to impact negatively on prospects for young people entering the workforce, would support for young artists to develop creative projects be a better option than expecting them to wait for work on a jobseekers benefit? These are some of the ways we might further leverage the immense taonga that is our creative arts sector to drive recovery while supporting artists.

I am heartened that the creative arts is an area where central government has indicated a determination to lead. The support package [in the 2020 budget](#) is so the arts can “focus on the recovery, regeneration and revitalisation of the cultural sector”. The rationale for such a focus is encouraging: “The arts, heritage and cultural sector is central to the nation’s recovery and will underpin the new post Covid-19 world providing us with a legacy of stories for our future. This sector supports and reflects who we are as New Zealanders, binds communities together and brings our stories to the New Zealand and world stage.”

It is also heartening that the minister for arts, culture and heritage is the prime minister, Jacinda Ardern, supported by ministers Grant Robertson and Carmel Sepuloni. It has always been the case that meaningful support for the arts in New Zealand has depended on a few rare politicians with vision and mana. After the second world war, as part of the country’s healing, Labour prime minister Peter Fraser personally oversaw the establishment of the National Orchestra, which became the NZSO, and established the New Zealand Literary Fund. In the 1970s National MP Allan Highet, our first Minister for the Arts, founded the National Youth Orchestra and the New Zealand Film Commission and actively supported the Symphony Orchestra, the Royal New Zealand Ballet, and the Arts Council.

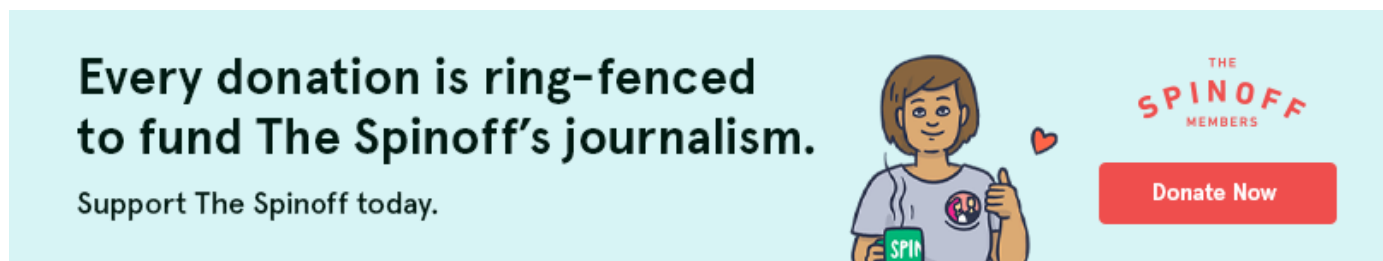
I feel confident that with visionary investment our artists and creative industries can play a leading role in hastening our recovery, economically, socially and culturally. But for that support to be meaningful, I think it needs to build upon the [just-announced](#) funding to help the arts “get back on their feet”, with a focus on the sorts of innovation I’ve outlined above. I’d hope that such investment would be widely and evenly distributed, with every region benefitting, given that all parts of Aotearoa New Zealand have produced great artists (our Booker Prize winners, Keri Hulme and Eleanor Catton, come from the South Island).

The international impact of artists like Kiri Te Kanawa, Witi Ihimaera, Patricia Grace, Alan Duff, Keri Hulme and Taika Waititi is all the argument needed to support even more robust

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Louisa Humphrey and Kaetaeta Watson – means that in future rounds Minister Sepuloni continues to be given a strong say in allocating the budget.

But we shouldn't assume that funding the creative sector is only the province of Culture and Heritage. Given this is an area where a little investment can reap significant returns, with an overall impact greater than some large primary industries, I would expect that the Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment is also looking very carefully at ways to incentivise creative activity. Peter Jackson and Weta Workshops have shown it is possible to take something small and local and scale it up to match the best in the world.



A 2015 [PWC report](#) on the creative industries for We Create estimated the total economic impact of the music, book publishing, film and television and games industries to be \$3,848 million and over 40,000 jobs – all this alongside the value of selling the Aotearoa New Zealand story overseas, especially now when the eyes of the world are on us and our response to Covid.

What about a funding scheme to incentivise getting even more creative minds – artists, composers, designers and writers – involved in businesses, or at the beginning of major new projects, particularly those underpinning our necessary move to a green and more sustainable economy? Such minds might provide a range of different perspectives and new innovative ideas for solving social, economic and planning issues, all the while telling our stories and promoting us internationally. Fostering creativity is vital for keeping pace with the changing nature of work. The Oxford Martin School, in a major study into the impacts of technology on future employment, [concluded that](#) 'creative and social intelligence' will be requirements for success in a rapidly automating workplace.

The remarkable and difficult weeks we are sharing in Aotearoa have taught us that for all our diversity, and despite our differences, we can unite in the face of crisis to achieve something that has made us ["the envy of many nations"](#) But does this unity end as we

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some things better? As we enter the next stage on our Covid journey, and work towards a recovery that benefits everyone, we must not forget the importance of the creative arts.

Our greatest author, Katherine Mansfield, [wrote](#): "Risk! Risk anything! Care no more for the opinions of others, for those voices. Do the hardest thing on earth for you. Act for yourself. Face the truth." Perhaps her words also need incorporating into our post-Covid manifesto. It's not a case of "could we do it?" – by quashing a virus that's leaving many nations struggling, we have once again demonstrated our country's capacity for imaginative and visionary powers that more inert countries lack. We should trust and believe in that same imagination and vision when we come to recognising the power of our creative and innovative arts to help transform Aotearoa New Zealand.

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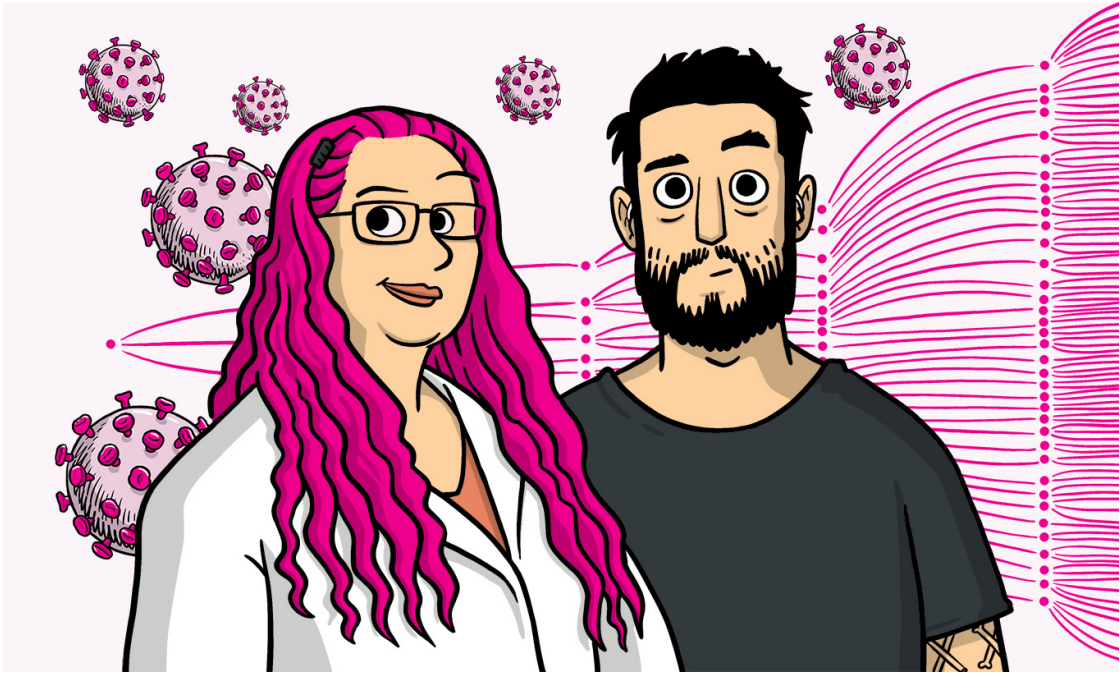
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